

Activist group gains more listeners

Contra charges draw full house

By Michael Kelly
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WASHINGTON — These days, when the Christic Institute talks, some people listen.

A year ago this week, the Washington-based social activist group generated a few headlines and much skepticism with the filing of an unusual federal civil lawsuit. The lawsuit stemmed from the bombing three years ago this week (May 30, 1984) of a press conference by Nicaraguan rebel leader Eden Pastora in La Penca, Nicaragua. The bombing remains unsolved.

The suit filed by a Christic Institute attorney, Daniel Sheehan, on behalf of two journalists, Tony Avirgan and Martha Honey, charged that the bombing was part of a larger conspiracy by ex-CIA agents, ex-military officers and private citizens secretly to fund and arm the rebels, called contras, with money generated from drug sales.

The charges — that a group of conspirators hired a Libyan exile named Amac Galil to blow up Mr. Pastora in a failed attempt that killed four people and wounded 17, and that the same group was involved in a secret contra-support network that depended on drug-smuggling money — were unsupported. They remain unproven.

But the existence of a secret network to arm and fund the contras during a 1984-1986 congressional ban has been established in recent congressional hearings on the Iran-contra affair. And some of the people who have recently admitted involvement in it are the same people named a year ago in the Christic Institute suit: Richard V. Secord, Robert W. Owen and John K. Singlaub.

Which is why, when Messrs. Sheehan and Avirgan called a press conference yesterday to reveal new material they said backs up their charges, they drew a capacity crowd to the National Press Club.

The revelations turned out to be inconclusive.

As Mr. Sheehan and Mr. Avirgan acknowledged, the Christic Institute and its charges are controversial. Some have said both the institute and the journalists are acting as disinformation agents, either unwitting or not, for the Sandinista government of Nicaragua.

The institute, organized by Mr. Sheehan and a Jesuit priest, Bill Da-

vis, in 1980, grew out of a lawsuit brought by the Jesuits' National Social Ministry Office in the case of Karen Silkwood, a former employee of Oklahoma's Kerr-McGee nuclear processing plant who died in an automobile crash under what some felt were suspicious circumstances.

Since its foundation, the institute has brought several public-interest lawsuits, all of them reflecting its stated interest in shaping public policy. It is currently involved in a lawsuit on behalf of people involved in the "sanctuary movement," which offers shelter to illegal Salvadoran immigrants. The institute has played an active role in the Iran-contra affair as a source of information for journalists and congressional staffers.

Mr. Avirgan produced a portion of a videotaped deposition by Mr. Pastora, the former head of a contra military group in Costa Rica called the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance. In the deposition taken recently in Costa Rica, Mr. Pastora requested a congressional investigation into the La Penca bombing and said he believed responsibility for it "falls in the hands of some official of the United States Government, either from Oliver North's group or certain sectors of the Central Intelligence Agency."

However, Mr. Avirgan acknowledged afterwards, Mr. Pastora's statements were not based on any evidence he possessed, but merely on suppositions drawn from published disclosures of Colonel North's activities. Mr. Pastora, a hero of the

1979 Nicaraguan revolution and former official in the Marxist government of Nicaragua, was initially supported by the U.S. government but had lost that support by 1984.

In another sworn deposition the institute released yesterday, a former Costa Rican government narcotics and intelligence officer named Alberto Guevara said he had seen an American rancher, John Hull, in the company of Mr. Galil shortly before the bombing. Mr. Hull owns ranches in Costa Rica and was named in the institute's lawsuit as one involved in the La Penca bombing and in drug smuggling for the contras.

Mr. Hull has admitted helping the contras by allowing airstrips on or near his ranches close to the Nicaraguan border to be used for weapons deliveries, but has adamantly denied any involvement in the La Penca bombing or in drug smuggling. Others named in the lawsuit, contra leader Adolfo Calero, Mr. Singlaub, a retired major general, and Mr. Owen, a courier and intelligence gatherer for Colonel North, have also denied complicity and have said the charges were "scurrilous" and "absurd."

Mr. Sheehan said both the Iran-contra independent counsel, Lawrence E. Walsh, and the congressional Iran-contra committees have declined to pursue the allegations he has raised. "They have dropped virtually a wall at October, 1984," he said. "They are going to be only investigating activities since the passage of the Boland Amendment," which, in October, banned U.S. military aid to the contras.